

as effectively and expeditiously as possible. The Task Force shall submit the action plan to the President within 45 days of the date of this order.

Sec. 12. Termination of Task Force. The Secretary, with the approval of the President, shall terminate the Task Force upon the completion of its duties.

Sec. 13. General Provisions.

(a) Nothing in this order shall be construed to impair or otherwise affect (i) authority granted by law to an agency or the head thereof, or (ii) functions of the Director of the Office of Management and Budget relating to budget, administrative, or legislative proposals.

(b) This order shall be implemented consistent with applicable law and subject to the availability of appropriations.

(c) This order is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or in equity, against the United States, its departments, agencies, entities, officers, employees, agents, or any other person.

George W. Bush

The White House,
March 6, 2007.

[Filed with the Office of the Federal Register,
10:57 a.m., March 7, 2007]

NOTE: This Executive order was published in the *Federal Register* on March 8.

**Remarks Following a Meeting With
Cochairs of the President's
Commission on Care for America's
Returning Wounded Warriors**

March 7, 2007

I am concerned that our soldiers and their families are not getting the treatment that they deserve, having volunteered to defend our country. Any report of medical neglect will be taken seriously by this administration, and I'm confident by the Congress, and we will address problems quickly.

I've asked two of America's fine public servants, Senator Dole and Secretary Shalala, to chair a Commission that will analyze our health care both at the Defense Department

and at the Veterans Department, to ensure that not only our soldiers but their families have complete confidence in the Government's upholding its responsibility to treat those who have been wounded.

I am concerned that there may be flaws in the system between when a soldier is on the battlefield, through the Defense Department, through the Veterans Administration, and finally to the community. I can't think of two better people to analyze the situation and to make recommendations, two people to lead a Commission of probably nine people, and that would be Senator Dole, who is himself a veteran, and a wounded veteran at that, a former distinguished Senator, a man who knows Washington well, but more importantly, he knows the kind of questions to ask; and Secretary Shalala, who is an expert on health. She lived after 8 years in President Clinton's administration; she knows what to look for; she knows the questions to ask.

And I'm confident that this Commission will bring forth the truth. And as I assured the Chairmen, I am confident that there will be a quick response to any problems that you may find. So I can't thank you enough for taking time, and to serve your nation once again. God bless. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:12 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Senator Bob Dole; and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna E. Shalala.

**Interview With Foreign Print
Journalists**

March 6, 2007

The President. Thanks for coming. I'm very much looking forward to my trip. I believe that a peaceful neighborhood and a prosperous neighborhood is in the interest of the United States of America. My trip is an opportunity to remind the folks in our neighborhood that the United States has a robust policy toward empowering individuals to realize their full potential.

I gave a speech yesterday that I outlined a vision of a nation that cares about the human condition. I spoke in terms of dollars

being spent, but more significantly, I spoke in terms of programs that are actually empowering and helping people improve their lives. And that's my message. My message is that the United States is a—should be viewed as a constructive partner in helping deal with significant issues, whether they be the issues of prosperity or education or health.

I'm really looking forward to going down and visiting with the respective leaders with whom I'll be meeting. These are men I respect. These are people whose opinions matter. And I'm confident we'll have a good trip.

And with that, we'll go around the room and answer questions, and then I've got to go give a speech to the American Legion, and you're welcome to come and listen to it if you'd like to. Are you going to listen to it, Holland [Steve Holland, Reuters]?

Q. Yes, sir.

The President. That's good.

Q. Absolutely.

The President. Will you cover it objectively? Of course you will; what am I thinking? [Laughter]

Do you want to start? Jose, where are you from?

Q. Mexico.

The President. So are you from Brazil?

Q. Yes.

The President. We'll go this way—this is the order of the trip: Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala, y Mexico. Thank you, Patricia.

Q. So I start, right?

The President. Please.

Brazil-U.S. Relations/Alternative Fuel Sources

Q. Mr. President, my first question is, I would like to know, what is the importance of the development of this new ethanol market, regional market, in political and economical terms? And how is that going to strengthen U.S.-Brazil relations?

The President. First, U.S.-Brazilian relations are strong. I can remember my first visit with President Lula. He wasn't sure what to expect when he came to the Oval Office, and frankly, I wasn't sure what to expect when he came. You know, people have reputations that precede them in life. And yet, after we spent a brief period of time,

we both came to realize, we share the same concerns—particularly for the poor, and we both represent big, influential nations; and that we can work together to achieve common objectives.

And one such objective is human rights and rule of law, a civil society that empowers individuals; that we believe government ought to respond to people and that people ought to have the ultimate say in the fate of government. And those were common principles. We came from different political directions—I readily concede—but nevertheless, when we listened carefully, we found common ground. And that puts us in a position where we can work in practical ways to address significant problems.

One such problem is trade, and President Lula and I will spend time on the Doha round to determine whether or not we're able to advance Doha in a constructive way that benefits our nations and, equally importantly, the world's poor. The best way to alleviate poverty is for there to be prosperity, and one way to enhance prosperity is through a world that trades freely and fairly.

The other area—another area of common ground is changing our energy uses. My last trip to Brazil, I was briefed extensively on Brazil's capacity to use its raw materials to develop a vast ethanol industry. And I was impressed by the progress Brazil has made. It reminded me of—the progress Brazil has made has reminded me of the vast potential that agricultural can make on the energy front.

So I now return to Brazil with a robust domestic agenda on ethanol. We had already had an agenda on ethanol, but it's now even more robust as a result of a mandatory fuel standard I laid out that said, the United States will be consuming about 35 billion gallons of ethanol.

The political implications of that, at least for the United States, are profound, in that we become less dependent on oil, which is good for our national security, as well as it helps us be good stewards of the environment. I happen to believe that the United States and Brazil can work together to, for example, share technologies with others in the region, which will help them become less

dependent on oil. And that's important, because dependency on oil exposes economies to the whims of the marketplace.

As China's demand for oil continues, if there's not a corresponding increase in international supply, what happens in China affects the ability of someone in Latin America to be able to keep more money—in other words, the gas prices go up. There is a direct correlation. And we live in a global economy, in which global economics—I mean, live in a global world in which global economics affects the lives of a lot of people in our neighborhood. And so becoming less dependent on oil will enhance the economic security of the region, and that's important because prosperity in the region is important for the United States. We want our friends and neighbors to be prosperous.

Anyway, thank you. Daniel.

Uruguay-U.S. Free Trade Agreement

Q. Recently, Uruguay and the United States signed a framework agreement on trade and investments. Now, how far do you think the United States and Uruguay can advance towards a free trade agreement? And taking into account that in the Uruguayan Government there are differing opinions on this subject and our President, a few days ago in a speech in reference to your trip, he said—he defined his Government as anti-imperialist—

The President. As anti-imperialist? Fine, that's—I would hope he would define my Government as profreedom. But back to the free trade issue. I think that—first of all, there are countervailing pressures in my own Government. People shouldn't take for granted that the United States wants to have trade agreements. As a matter of fact, there's a strong protectionist sentiment in America. I strongly resist those temptations. It's in our interests to be a nation which treats others the same way we want to be treated in the marketplace. Again, I repeat, I know it's in the interest of the poor to have markets open for their products.

And so I will go to Uruguay as a strong defender of trade. I fully understand there are local sensitivities. I fully understand that there are pressures on leaders regarding trade and that sometimes, it takes a period

of time for people to get comfortable with different types of trading agreements. And therefore, I will make my case about why I hope we can continue what has been a constructive relationship with Uruguay without pressing the case beyond that, which is politically possible.

And again, I will assure the President that I will be—we want to listen to concerns, we will work closely as friends. And I will remind him that here at home, it's not an easy sell, necessarily, and that if he believes trade is in the interests of his country and I believe it's in mine, we've both got to work constructively to achieve common objectives.

As to characterizations of the United States, I will remind him that we are a generous, compassionate nation that believes in peace. And that on the one hand, we'll protect ourselves from attacks that I'm convinced the enemy wants to launch on America again. It's my most solemn duty. But at the same time, I'll remind him that the advance of liberty, the advance of human rights and human dignity is in our national interests.

Anyway, I'm looking forward to the trip. It's going to be—I'm told it's a beautiful country. I've never been to Uruguay, and I'm looking forward to it.

Carlos.

Colombian Government/Plan Colombia II

Q. Thank you, Mr. President, for the invitation.

The President. *Por nada.*

Q. *Por la invitacion.*

The President. *Si. Por nada.*

Q. Thank you. In the last few months, Colombia has been shocked by scandal of possible links between paramilitary groups, which are terrorist organizations, and members of Congress as well as public officials. Given the fact that until now, only close allies and collaborators of President Alvaro Uribe have been involved in this scandal, can this scandal affect the support that your Government is giving to the Government of Colombia?

The President. President Uribe has made it very clear that he is going to—he promotes and expects there to be a full investigation

of any allegations. And as a result of strengthening the prosecutorial offices, he has sent a signal that if, in fact, there are allegations that are worthy of further investigation and the facts lead to prosecution, he will fully prosecute. And to me, that gives me great comfort in seeing his strong leadership. And I believe that that leadership will stand him in good stead with our Congress.

The budget I've submitted is one that's a little less than last year but, nevertheless, is a strong commitment to a Plan Colombia II. One of the reasons why the budget is a little less than last year is, it goes to show the progress that Colombia is making. In my judgment, President Uribe has done a fabulous job for leading that country. He's been very strong and very resolute, and it's an impressive record. Secondly, the economy is improving, as you know, and therefore, Colombia can carry more of the load of II. But nevertheless, the commitment is a significant commitment, and I will work very hard with Congress to get that commitment passed in the budget.

Eduardo.

Narcotics and Drug Trafficking/Crime Prevention

Q. Hi, Mr. President, thank you very much.

The President. How are you? Thanks for coming.

Q. Mr. President, a lot of people in Guatemala and in Central America is worried about the violence that might be generated by organized crime, gangs, and drug trafficking. How severe would you say this problem is? And how the Government of the United States can work together with Guatemala and the other Central American countries to fight this problem?

The President. Well, that's a common issue that we have with our very important friend to the south. It is an issue that concerns both Mexico and the United States. The issue of crime in Central America concerns both Mexico and the United States because, oftentimes, that crime can be exported into either country.

My attitude is that the United States can help provide Justice Department and information sharing—Justice Department col-

laboration with their respective people in government.

In terms of narcotrafficking, the first thing the United States can do is convince our people to stop using drugs. If there's a demand, inevitably there will be a supply, so we have an obligation here at home to work to reduce drug usage. If people don't find a better market—if people don't find a healthy market, there will be less pressure to produce drugs.

Secondly, we can enforce our borders and make it harder for drug dealers to be able to get their drugs to market. One way to better enforce our borders, besides stepping up presence on our border, is to pass a comprehensive immigration bill in the Congress, one that says that the person coming to do work that Americans aren't doing doesn't have to sneak across the border, thereby enabling our Border Patrol to be able to focus on narcotrafficking. In other words, you can raise the cost of getting drugs into our country by making it harder for them to penetrate our borders.

Thirdly, we can work internally with governments, and do. We do a lot of bilateral work. I don't want to jump to—I'm not going to jump to the next country, but one perfect example is the cooperation and collaboration between Mexico and the United States on helping each other with information sharing.

Fourthly, we have got Central American gangs in the United States, that as we find and arrest, we can share information we learn from them with the host government. So there's a lot of collaboration efforts.

The best way, however, to ultimately deal with crime, besides reducing the demand for their product, is to enhance prosperity. And that's why CAFTA is an important agreement. We would rather people try to make a living honestly. And therefore, there needs to be hope; there needs to be the possibility of that honest living to be able to be made so that youngsters don't turn—feel they have to turn to crime.

And finally, a social program, social justice programs, like education; the United States spends a lot of money in Latin America on education programs, programs aimed at either training teachers to teach and/or direct aid to education programs throughout our hemisphere. An educated child is one that

will have a hopeful future, and therefore, less likely to be recruited into a criminal gang.
Hombre.

Mexico-U.S. Border Issues/Immigration Reform

Q. *Gracias.*

The President. *Si.*

Q. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. *Si.*

Q. Again, thank you for the invitation. And my question goes in the same sense as my friend Eduardo.

The President. I thought so. I thought it might. [*Laughter*]

Q. Yes, as you know, President Calderon has positioned himself at the forefront in the war against drugs, and especially on violence that derives from drug trafficking. What do you think should be Mr. Calderon's next step? And would his efforts now motivate the U.S. to be more conscience in stopping illegal weapons crossing the border, north to south?

The President. It's a very interesting question. Mexico is rightly concerned that there are traffickers taking contraband from our country into Mexico. Just like we're concerned that there are traffickers bringing humans and/or drugs from south to north, which means that we have got to commit ourselves to rational border policy that will work.

I'll repeat what I said earlier about comprehensive immigration reform: I'm a strong supporter of comprehensive immigration reform. I believe strongly that a comprehensive bill will make it easier to focus on drugs and guns if people don't feel like they've got to sneak into the United States.

Secondly, such a bill will enable us to—it will help us dismantle an industry that has sprung up that uses human beings as product, as chattel. And that's unacceptable to this country. Now the incentive is for people who want to do work that Americans aren't doing, is to pay money to be stuffed in the back of an 18-wheeler, for example, and driven across and ducked out in the desert, where they hope somebody will come and rescue them and take them to a motel or a house where they have to rent, and then they finally work their way toward work. The industry that has sprung up as a result of the

current immigration law is inhumane, and it doesn't reflect the values of the United States.

So to answer your question about drugs moving one way and guns moving the other, immigration reform will help. It will mean that the people and assets we have on the border can be focused on precisely that which you're concerned about.

Now, as to President Calderon's next steps, that's up to him, and one purpose of my visit—it to listen to his strategy. It's a Mexican strategy. I have confidence that this man, elected by the people, will devise a strategy that is best for Mexico. And the role of the United States is not to devise a strategy but is to listen very carefully as to how we can help implement that strategy, and part of my visit is to be a listener and a partner.

And I appreciate the strong stance that President Calderon has taken. He has shown courage because he is committing the stake to take on some very powerful, very rich, and very lethal people. And that takes courage, and I admire courage when it comes to leaders in public office.

Patricia.

We'll go one more round, then I've got to go give a speech, which Holland says he's going to go listen to. [*Laughter*]

President's Upcoming Visit to Central and South America/U.S. Foreign Aid

Q. There's a perception that one of the objectives of your trip is to strengthen relations with the countries that are U.S. friends. So my question is, what do you think of the rise of this so-called alternative development model, championed by President Chavez, that calls for nationalization, greater government intervention? And what is Brazil's role in the region, taking that new development model into account?

The President. Each leader is going to have to adopt a governing style and an economic model that they believe yields to prosperity for their people. I strongly believe that government-run industry is inefficient and will lead to more poverty. I believe if the state tries to run the economy, it will enhance poverty and reduce opportunity. So the United States brings a message of open markets and open government to the region.

My trip is to remind the people of Central and South America that we live in the same neighborhood and that the United States is committed to empowering individuals to realize their God-given potential.

I would like to cite some statistics for you, just to help prove my case. Since I have been the President, the line item for traditional bilateral aid has doubled, from about \$800 million a year to \$1.6 billion for the region. And that's a total, when you total all up the money that is spent, because of the generosity of our taxpayers, that's \$8.5 billion to programs that promote social justice—for example, promote education and health.

The reason I bring that up, it's very important for me to remind our own people as to why it's important to continue to be generous in our neighborhood. If you're interested in peace, then you've got to be interested in prosperity and hope. Our programs are aimed at encouraging hope.

Secondly, there's about—make sure I get this right, here—there's about \$350 billion of direct foreign investment in the region. Now that's important because investment yields jobs. And wise economic policy recognizes that investment can help improve the lives of the worker or the person who's anxious to make a living.

In my speech yesterday, I pointed out the fact that, by far, the vast majority of people in our neighborhood are really hard-working, decent, family-oriented people who just need a chance. And a direct foreign investment—that means somebody believing that the investment climate is worthy of investment—helps that working person, that hard-working person find employment.

And so our presence in the region is sometimes very quiet, but very effective. And one part of—main purpose of the trip is to tell people that we take the region and its problems very seriously and have got a good record.

And we'll let others make their case as to how best to proceed. We'll let others come and explain why their point of view makes sense. All I can tell you is that I believe that the system of government and the system of economies that we promote is fair.

Now, I fully recognize that until people actually feel progress in their pocketbook,

that there's going to be frustrations with forms of government. But that doesn't mean you kind of revert to something that I don't believe will work. It does mean you've got to make sure that the aid and the progress that you're making actually helps.

Daniel.

Central and South America-U.S. Relations

Q. I'm going to do a followup on that question—

The President. Okay. Sure.

Q. For example, we, in Uruguay, we are seeing President Chavez's policy of financial agreements and commercial agreements on investments. And he's also going to Argentina on the same day that you are going to Uruguay, and he's even holding a street rally in Buenos Aires on that same day. I want to know how you view this—

The President. Look, I dare—I go a lot of places, and there are street rallies. And my attitude is, I love freedom and the right for people to express themselves. I bring a message of good will to Uruguay and to the region. My trip is one that says, let's find ways to work together for the common good. And the United States has got a strong record of helping people, and I'm really proud of it.

And it is very important for the American people to hear firsthand our concerns about our neighborhood in order for them to continue to support programs, such as the Millennium Challenge Account, which is an \$855 million program, and encouraging good governance in the region; or the education for the—we've got a new teacher initiative we've laid out, and we believe by, I think it's 2008, we'll have trained 20,000 teachers.

There are a lot of—you've got to understand that in a country where there are isolationist tendencies, where people sometimes say, "It's not our problem," that the President has got to be constantly reminding people that poverty in our neighborhood is our problem. So the trip gives me an opportunity to highlight successes and to point out challenges so that the American people stay engaged.

One of the great assets in our country is the fact that there are compassionate people

that are willing to go into parts of the world where there's desperation and poverty. You know, our faith-based programs, for example. I'm not sure to the extent to which they've gone to Uruguay, but I know in Guatemala, there is an extensive program to help poor workers find market access so they can make a living. I'm going to visit one such program.

Our military—people think of the United States military as war fighters, and they are when the Commander in Chief puts them in such a situation, but our military is building health clinics throughout Central America, for example, in a very quiet way. And my trip will help herald some of the programs we're doing. One, we're trying to convince the American people it's worth it; and secondly, reminding our neighbors that we care.

Carlos.

Colombia-U.S. Free Trade Agreement

Q. Mr. President, in Colombia, there are growing concerns about two initiatives that the U.S. Congress is now considering. One is the free trade agreement with Colombia, and the aid package for 2008. Democrats in Congress have already raised some objections about labor, ecological, and human rights issues concerning the FTA. In the case of the aid package, some people in your administration have said that Colombia should assume more costs of Plan Colombia in the future. Also, Democrats are already talking about reducing the aid.

What will your administration do to increase the possibility for the approval of the FTA? And should Colombia expect to have a reduction in the aid it receives in the years to come?

The President. First, I will defend our budget strongly, that we've submitted to Congress, which, as I described earlier, does have a reduction, but only because we think Colombia is more capable of funding certain aspects of the program. But nevertheless, it is a robust program. And I look forward to telling President Uribe that he can count on the United States defending that which we sent up to Congress. That's what we believe is the right number, and we will vigorously defend the number.

Free trade with Colombia and Peru are coming up for votes. And like all free trade

agreements, we will battle for their passage. Now, obviously, to the extent that we could—and by the way, the President has been here working hard, been making phone calls. But these are tough votes. And the reason I mention these tough votes, again, is that people shouldn't take access to the U.S. market for granted. I mean, the CAFTA vote was a tough vote, and we worked hard, along with the leaders. And this will be a tough vote; I don't want to send any other signal but that. On the other hand, it's an important vote. And we want to—and I call upon Democrats to understand the consequences of this vote—and Republicans. Members of Congress have got to understand that when we negotiate in good faith a free trade agreement that the—they need to understand the consequences of not supporting it.

And so I'm—this will not be my first trade battle, nor will it be my last, hopefully—but it's going to be a battle. And we look forward to working with the Government to get it passed.

Eduardo.

Trade/Prosperity in the Americas

Q. Mr. President, so far, what's your evaluation of the impact of the free trade with Central America? And what do you expect in the medium and long term to be delivered by the CAFTA? And how the countries of Central America and the United States can work together to improve or to make it better, the trade between countries?

The President. There are great expectations when trade agreements get signed that all of the sudden, there's going to be instant prosperity. But that's not the way it works. Economies develop. And I fully understand that in parts of Central America, when people heard that U.S. markets were open and the CAFTA markets were open that there would be—people say, well, we've done this to increase prosperity. And so there's—I'm sure there's some expectations that have not been met.

Part of my messaging in Central America will be that opening markets is the first step toward more prosperity. Now, I'm going to go to a program, Labradores Mayas, that is a great example of what is possible for an indigenous farmer that was scratching out a

living, ends up kind of establishing a co-op, goes and gets a loan, which, by the way, is an essential part of our program—and that is to provide microloans to people to be able to begin to realize dreams. And it works. It's actually a very effective program.

This was one such program. It was what, a micro thing, but nevertheless, the co-op was able to then develop an irrigation system, which then made their production of high-specialty crops more efficient. I can't wait to see this. The one reason I go is to herald what is possible. It is a reminder that the United States approach to the region is not a political approach, but it is a human approach. It is one that emphasizes that human potential exists and that the best programs are those that elevate the potential.

So I will try to help deal with expectations, Eduardo, about how markets evolve. And one way for me to do so is to remind people about the effects of NAFTA with our important neighbor to the south, Mexico.

When I grew up in Texas, the border, *la frontera*, was like a third world on both sides of the border. And then in the early nineties, NAFTA was passed. But there wasn't instant successes. It took awhile for people to realize how the inevitable adjustments that will come when people start accessing market. And if you were to go down to the border today, you'd be stunned at the prosperity on both sides of the border because of trade.

And yet today, obviously, it's 2007, and this is 16 years later. Now, when I was the Governor of Texas—I was elected—I was sworn-in '95—we were beginning to see the benefits of the NAFTA trade on the border. But it took awhile. And I understand if you're poor, it's hard to be patient. I fully understand that. And so there's a natural tension between the expectations of prosperity and the need to scratch out a living.

To answer your question, in the long run, what ends up happening is, again, I think the Mexican model is good to look at, because we're constantly dealing with trade disputes. There will be the argument over the—whatever. Since I've been President, we've dealt with Mexico on a variety of fronts, like, I think tomatoes or corn, whatever—avocados, exactly, *por cierto*—cement. There's a constant need to evaluate the trade agreements

and to deal with the natural tensions that grow up. It's not easy to have a trading relationship, but it's a lot more hopeful than not having a trading relationship, is my view.

And that's why my discussions with President Lula on the Doha round are going to be very important. Brazil is a major player in the international community. And the Doha round, in my judgment, is a vital round that we would like to see progress, because I'd repeat to you that a system that trades fairly and a system with more open markets is one that allows people to more likely rise out of poverty. A successful round of Doha is by far the most effective poverty-alleviating program in the world.

Anyway. The final question. Jose.

Energy

Q. Mr. President, from your past experience—

The President. Joe.

Q. *Gracias.*

The President. Jorge. Jorge W. [*Laughter*]

Q. From your past experience in the energy sector, you know that Mexico and Canada are strategic partners for the U.S.—through the subject of energy. And what benefits do you think that Mexico will get, and also its neighbors, from a position of opening its energy sector to private investment?

The President. Jose was right that our biggest suppliers of energy are Canada and Mexico, and that's good. I'd much rather be getting energy from stable sources that are friendly than from sources that are unstable and not friendly. And since we import about 60 percent of our crude oil from overseas, we are obviously dependent upon stability—one reason why, Jose, that it's important for us to work with countries to help develop a more robust ethanol and biofuels industry. And I believe it's coming. However, having said that, we're still going to require oil. And to the extent that Mexico makes the decision internally to be able to attract enough capital to expand to keep up with world demand, that would be positive. But most of all, it would be positive for Mexico.

Mexico has got a valuable asset in its energy sector. The demand for that energy is significant, however, the exploitation of that

energy requires significant investment. It requires investment to keep their sector—the current sector modernized, and as you all know, that as Mexico continues to expand its production in deeper waters in the Gulf of Mexico, that requires even more capital investment. So to the extent that the Government feels comfortable being able to track sources of capital outside of the Government cashflow, to me that would be something that certainly ought to be considered by President Calderon.

And we're fortunate that Canada and Mexico are vibrant energy producers.

Okay? Looking forward to the trip.

Cuba

Q. A final one on Castro?

The President. On Castro? Sure. Sure. The universal Castro question? [Laughter] Can you come up with a unified question?

Q. What role can the countries of Latin America, like Brazil, like other partners in Latin America, can play in the Cuban transition to democracy?

The President. The message, in my judgment, to the world during a transition period, is freedom—that we ought to expect that the Cuban people have the right to express themselves openly without fear of reprisal, to be able to express themselves at the ballot box, and to be able to realize potential as a result of an open economy.

What I hope happens is that we together insist that transition doesn't mean transition from one figure to another, but transition means from one type of government to a different type of government, based upon the will of the people. That will certainly be the position of the United States. We believe the Cuban people ought to make the decision for the future. We believe it ought to be up to the people, the long-suffering people of that island to decide their fate, not the fate—not to be decided because somebody is somebody's brother; the fate ought to be decided because that's what the people want.

And I would hope those who have lived under the blessings of liberty have the same message. *Vamos a ver, cuando*—how long he stays on Earth, that's a decision that will be made by the Almighty. But once that happens, once—you know, Fidel Castro may

live—I don't know, I don't know how long he's going to live—but nevertheless, I do believe that the system of government that he's imposed upon the people ought not live, if that's what the people decide.

Okay. *Gracias*.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 9:03 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil; President Tabare Vazquez of Uruguay; President Alvaro Uribe Velez of Colombia; President Felipe de Jesus Calderon Fournier of Mexico; and President Fidel Castro Ruz and First Vice President Raul Castro Ruz of Cuba. A reporter referred to President Hugo Chavez Frias of Venezuela. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on March 7. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of this interview. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Interview With Natalia Orozco of RCN TV of Colombia

March 7, 2007

President's Upcoming Visit to Central and South America

Ms. Orozco. Thank you, Mr. President, for this time with RCN TV Colombia.

The President. Thank you. I'm really looking forward to going to Bogota.

Ms. Orozco. Thank you, Mr. President. I have to start by asking you this. You're arriving to Bogota when President Bush—President Uribe is facing a deep crisis because of—we've got a political scandal. Does this affect the support, the confidence that you have always expressed to him?

The President. No. As a matter of fact, I've been very impressed by how he's handled this latest issue. President Uribe is a very strong leader; he's committed to justice; he believes in fairness; and he's a man who has proven he can get things done. And so my confidence in the President is very high. And I'm looking forward to expressing that confidence about—to not only the people of Colombia but also to the people in my Congress.